

Express Mail Label No. EL 593 577 565 US

PATENT

Docket No. 11298.4/NKN

UNITED STATES PATENT APPLICATION
of
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for
A SECURED
COMMERCIAL TRANSACTION

00720064 100100

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention pertains generally to systems and methods for conducting secure commercial transactions in an open marketplace. More particularly, the present invention pertains to systems and methods for altering a file before it is to be sold by a seller, and then revealing the file for subsequent use by a buyer. The present invention is particularly, but not exclusively, useful for conducting an Internet transaction wherein a public key is employed to conceal a private key that, in turn, will decrypt the file and allow it to be revealed.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Artists, when they want to sell their work products, are like any other seller in a marketplace. They desire to be somehow compensated for their efforts. The work product of an artist, however, unlike many other kinds of work products, has value primarily because of the unique expression that is given to the particular work by the artist. Unfortunately, this expression is often susceptible to being copied. This is so regardless of the particular type of work product involved; whether it be a literary work, a musical work, a dramatic work, a pictorial work, an audiovisual work, a sound recording or a work in some other form.

An ever-present problem for the artist/author of a publishable work has been how best to offer the work to an audience. More specifically, the concern has been for how to offer the work product in a manner that will ensure the artist is appropriately compensated for his/her endeavors. Heretofore, many artists have relied on publishing houses in order to commercially offer their respective works to the public. This, of course, assumes the artist/author is able to interest the publishing house in the work product, and the publishing house determines the work product is commercially viable. If the work is published, the publishing houses have

The file that is created by the seller contains at least two mandatory parts. These are an overhead and a content. It should be noted, however, that the file may also contain a header as an optional third part. Importantly, the overhead part of the file is encrypted by the seller using a public key that

5 is provided to the seller by the transaction agent. Thus, even though the overhead is encrypted by the seller, in accordance with the present invention only the transaction agent might be capable of decrypting or decoding the overhead. As contemplated for the present invention, the overhead of the file will include commercial material about the file, such as pricing and payment

10 terms. Also, it may contain such information as the minimum allowed payment, the file name, and the seller's accounting identification. Further, the overhead may also contain the number of times the content may be decrypted, an expiration date, and the buyer's account identification in the event the file is intended for a single buyer. Most importantly, the overhead

15 will also include a private key which must be used by a potential buyer to decrypt the content part of the file.

As implied above, in addition to the encryption of the overhead part of the file (using a public key), the content part of the file is also encrypted. The content part of the file, however, is encrypted using a private key. As

20 contemplated for the present invention, the content part of the file will include the particular work or works being sold for value by the seller. Examples of the content part of the file include: books, documents, pamphlets, movies, songs, games, pictures, software, or passwords. Additionally, the content may also include such information as Internet search results, coupons, proof-

25 of-purchase codes, passwords, private Internet URL's, and answers to questions.

Not all of the file needs to be encrypted. Unlike either the overhead part of the file or the content part of the file, the header of the file can be in clear text and will not be encrypted. This, of course, is done to allow the

30 potential buyer to see and evaluate information contained in the file. For this purpose, the header can include advertising and informational material about the content of the file, samples of the content and suggested prices, as well

as informational material about the seller. Further, the header can include actual portions of the content of the file.

In the operation of the systems and methods of the present invention, the seller creates a file (header, overhead and content) that is presented on an Internet website or in some other marketing venue. For this presentation, the seller encrypts the content part of the file with a local key that is under the control of the seller. Also, the seller encrypts the overhead part of the file with a public key that is obtained by the seller from the transaction agency and is under the control of the transaction agency. Recall, the overhead part of the file also includes the seller's private key. After the overhead and the content parts of the file have been encrypted, the seller then presents the clear text header of his/her file to the scrutiny of potential buyers in the marketplace. It is to be noted at this point that the seller presents the whole file to the marketplace. This includes, the header, the overhead and the content. Only the header, however, can be read even though the whole file is available to everyone. Further, in this condition, the file may be downloaded and traded without incurring any monetary transaction, and without revealing any content.

When a buyer has decided to purchase a particular content from the seller, the buyer will "click on" a link to the file (e.g. a logo at the website) to notify the transaction agency of his/her intention to purchase the file. The transaction agency will then decrypt the overhead part of the file that was encrypted with its public key to reveal the seller's private key. This private key is then used to decrypt or decode the content part of the file. As envisioned by the present invention this decryption of the content can be accomplished either directly by the buyer, or it can be accomplished by the transaction agent who will then send the decrypted file to the buyer.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The novel features of this invention, as well as the invention itself, both as to its structure and its operation, will be best understood from the accompanying drawings, taken in conjunction with the accompanying

description, in which similar reference characters refer to similar parts, and in which:

Fig. 1 is a schematic representation of the respective parties to a transaction that is accomplished in accordance with the present invention;

5 Fig. 2 is a schematic representation of the component parts of a file (object) that is published by an artist (seller) for a transaction that is to be accomplished in accordance with the methods of the present invention; and

Fig. 3 is a time-line representation of the actions that are to be taken by participating parties during a transaction as it is to be accomplished in accordance with the methods of the present invention.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

Referring initially to Fig. 1, a schematic representation of a transaction group, that includes the respective parties to a commercial transaction as it is to be accomplished in accordance with the present invention, is shown and is generally designated 10. As shown, the group 10 essentially includes a transaction agency 12, a seller 14 and an buyer 16. Further, it is indicated in Fig. 1 that the transaction agency 12 effectively controls a buyer's account 18, and a seller's account 20.

Still referring to Fig. 1, it is shown for a preferred embodiment of the present invention that each of the parties in the group 10 (i.e. transaction agency 12, seller 14 and buyer 16) are connected in communication with the Internet 22. These communication connections with the Internet 22 are respectively indicated in Fig. 1 by arrow 24 (transaction agency 12), arrow 26 (seller 14), and arrow 28 (buyer 16). It is envisioned for the present invention that, instead of using the Internet 22, communication between the various parties of group 10 can be conducted by other means well known in the pertinent art, such as by land line or wireless telephone connections. The arrow 30 between transaction agency 12 and the seller 14, as well as the arrow 32 between the transaction agency 12 and the buyer 16 are both exemplary of such connections.

In Fig. 2, a representative schematic of a file (object) that is created by the seller 14 in accordance with the present invention, is shown and is generally designated 34. Specifically, the component parts of the file 34 are a header 36, an overhead 38 and a content 40. As envisioned for the present invention, the header 36 will include public material and will remain in clear text. More specifically, the header 36 can include advertising and informational material about the seller 14 and his/her work product. For example, the header 36 can include the title of a work, its table of contents, an introduction to the work and, perhaps, even selected portions of the work. By way of further example, such selections may include portions of a poem, or the first thirty seconds of a song. In any event, as indicated above, it is envisioned that the header 36 will not be encrypted and will be presented in clear text for perusal and consideration by a potential buyer 16.

Unlike the header 36, both the overhead 38 and the content 40 of the file 34 are to be encrypted. Specifically, the overhead 38 is to be encrypted using a public key, and the content 40 is to be encrypted using a private key. Within the encrypted overhead 38 there will be general information about the pricing and payment terms that are established by the seller 14 for the conduct of the commercial transaction. Most importantly, the overhead 38 will include the private key that will eventually be used by a potential buyer 16 for decrypting the content 40. The content 40 of the file 34 will then include the actual work product that is being presented by the seller 14 for sale to the buyer 16. Recall, this all may be done on either the Internet 22 or in any other convenient marketing venue.

The actual operation of the methods and system of the present invention will be best appreciated with reference to Fig. 3. Specifically, Fig. 3 presents a time line 42 for the actions that are to be taken by the various parties of group 10 during a transaction in accordance with the present invention. As indicated in Fig. 3, it is first necessary for the seller 14 to create the file 34 (Fig. 2). Then, unless previously accomplished, the seller 14 will open the seller's account 20 with the transaction agency 12. This action is indicated in Fig. 3 by the arrow 44. When the seller's account 20 is opened,

the transaction agency 12 will receive administrative information from the transaction agency 12, and the transaction agency 12 will provide the seller 14 with a public key as indicated by the arrow 46. Recall, a "public" key is an encryption/decryption device for generating encrypted messages. The public key is unique, however, in that only the intended recipient can decode the messages. This will be so even though the encryption key is made public. For the present invention, the intended recipient is the transaction agency 12.

Upon receipt of the public key from the transaction agency 12, the seller 14 will then encrypt the file 34. Specifically, the seller 14 will use the public key to encrypt the overhead 38. The seller 14, however, will use a private key to encrypt selected portions, or all, of the content 40. The header 36 remains in clear text. As indicated by the arrow 48 in Fig. 3, the file 34 is then presented on the Internet 22 for possible purchase by a buyer 16.

Once the work product (e.g. file 34) of the seller 14 has been published and offered for sale on the Internet 22, the potential buyer 16 is able to peruse the clear-text header 36 to determine whether he/she desires to purchase the content 40. If so, the buyer 16 will "click on" the file 34, or they will otherwise manifest their intent to purchase the content 40 of file 34. At this time, unless earlier accomplished, the buyer 16 opens the buyer's account 18 with the transaction agency 12. This action is identified in Fig. 3 by the arrow 50 and it can be accomplished in any of several ways well known in the art, such as by telephone, written correspondence, or over the Internet 22. Subsequently, assuming that the buyer 16 has been successful in opening or establishing a viable buyer's account 18 with the transaction agency 12, several actions are taken by the transaction agency 12.

The time line 42 in Fig. 3 indicates that after a buyer 16 has indicated a desire to purchase the content 40 of file 34, the transaction agency 12 will then decode or decrypt the overhead 38. To do this, the transaction agency 12 uses the public key that was earlier provided to the seller 14 for encryption of the overhead 38. Recall, only the transaction agency 12 is capable of using the public key for decryption of the overhead 38. Thus, after decrypting the overhead 38, the transaction agency 12 can then send pricing and

payment terms to the buyer 16 (indicated by arrow 52 in Fig. 3). The buyer 16 may then approve or cancel the transaction. Alternatively, the buyer 16 may forward a bid to the transaction agency 12 along with the overhead 38. If approved, the transaction agency 12 will debit the buyer's account 18 and credit the seller's account 20 with whatever value has been determined by the various parties of the transaction group 10 in their respective dealings with each other.

The final actions that will be taken to complete the transaction envisioned by the present invention, are to decrypt and reveal the content 40 of the file 34 to the buyer 16. This can be done in several ways. Preferably, once the transaction agency 12 has decoded the overhead 38 (which includes the private key) the transaction agency 12 will transfer the private key to the buyer 16. The buyer 16 is then able to directly decode or decrypt the content 40 with the private key. Alternatively, after the buyer 16 has indicated his/her desire to purchase the content 40 of file 34, and the buyer's account 18 has been opened, the transaction agency 12 can decode or decrypt the content 40 of file 34. The decrypted content 40 will then be sent from the transaction agency 12 to the buyer 16. In yet another variation, instead of being the actual work product of the seller 14, the content 40 can be an invoice or a proof-of-payment code, to be presented to the seller 14, that is evidence of a collateral transfer of merchandise. In such a case, the work product of the seller 14 will, most likely, be transported to the buyer 16 by a carrier 54 (see Fig. 1).

While the particular Secured Commercial Transaction as herein shown and disclosed in detail is fully capable of obtaining the objects and providing the advantages herein before stated, it is to be understood that it is merely illustrative of the presently preferred embodiments of the invention and that no limitations are intended to the details of construction or design herein shown other than as described in the appended claims.